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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR THE ASSISTANT COMMANDANT OF THE
MARINE CORPS, DECEMBER 17 - 19 VISIT TO MOROCCO

REF: CMC WASHINGTON DC DTG 181824Z NOV 09

¶1. (SBU) Summary: General Amos, we welcome you to Morocco. Morocco has been an exemplary partner in the struggle against terrorism, and our military and political cooperation is growing. As a result, Morocco has been designated a Major non-NATO Ally. Morocco serves as a regional model for economic change and democratic reform; yet it faces significant external and internal challenges, which U.S. assistance attempts to ameliorate. While Morocco's principal foreign tie is with Europe and it has advanced status with the European Union (EU), Morocco is one of our strongest allies in the Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) region. Its top priority is U.S. support for its position on the Western Sahara territorial dispute and for integration in North Africa. End summary.

Introduction

¶2. (SBU) Morocco is a country in the throes, albeit unevenly, of change and reform. Economic growth has averaged about six percent per year; and investment, tourism and remittances have boomed, although they have been slowed by the global financial crisis. Slums are coming down, and, according to the government of Morocco's statistics, so is unemployment. Freedom of the press has expanded, but there are still serious restrictions. Those who challenge them can suffer heavy fines, libel judgments, and, more rarely, jail. Political freedoms have grown as well, although they remain constrained by a system in which Parliament lacks much power. King Mohammed VI has stressed the need for judicial reform to revise a system that is widely seen as corrupt and inefficient. Additional reforms could strengthen Morocco's democracy, but, with stability a priority, it could take decades.

¶3. (SBU) Mission strategic goals are economic growth and reform, countering terrorism, promoting U.S.-Moroccan partnership, enhancing democracy and governance, and resolving regional conflicts while maintaining close strategic cooperation. Military-to-military engagement contributes to advancing these goals. We believe expanding Morocco's economic base will do as much to address popular dissatisfaction with the political system as will strengthening democratic institutions. The purchase of F-16 and T-6 aircraft, and the enhanced engagement they will trigger, can promote modernization in a military already fully under civilian control. U.S. military engagement focused on professional training and education programs helps counterterrorism efforts. The robust interaction between our two militaries is an important example of institution building that is a centerpiece of our relationship. The reinforcement of the Moroccan military helps maintain

regional stability in a context of even greater Algerian modernization expenditure. It assures the Government of Morocco that it is a strong, long-term Major non-NATO Ally, and it facilitates U.S. regional objectives not only in Africa but in the Middle East.

Military Engagement

¶4. (SBU) The Moroccan military has undertaken a sweeping effort to modernize a military force that fields predominantly Korean and Vietnam War era equipment. While the F-16 and T-6 sales from the vast bulk of the dollar figure for this modernization, the total Foreign Military Sales and Foreign Military Financing portfolio totals some 120 cases in excess of USD 3 billion. The list of pending or prospective sales includes 200 M1A1 main battle tanks; CH-47D and SH-60 rotary wing aircraft; Gulfstream and Beechcraft operational/Distinguished Visitor (DV) support aircraft; Hawk, Chaparral and Stinger anti-aircraft systems; and solicitations for surveillance and reconnaissance aircraft and unmanned aerial vehicles. Morocco is the second largest recipient of excess defense articles (EDA) from the U.S. These sales and transfers permit the Moroccan military both to hold its position as a regional power and be able to participate as a coalition partner. They further solidify the substantial U.S. inclination by the Moroccan military, although there are competitors that can dramatically underbid U.S. offerings, and Morocco does not limit itself to U.S. equipment.

¶5. (SBU) Military modernization further strengthens the Moroccan military by continuing and expanding exposure to U.S. doctrine, tactics, techniques, procedures and personnel. The expanded requirement to train operators and maintainers for the F-16 and T-6 aircraft alone will practically equal the current annual training allocation for all Moroccan personnel across all the services and government organizations. Moreover, the integration of a fourth generation fighter into the Royal Moroccan Air Force will stimulate a modernization of the full-spectrum approach to operating and sustaining such aircraft, from facilities to logistics to aerial employment to command and control. This provides an unparalleled opportunity to shape our engagement with the Royal Air Force. A superb boost this year is the selection of Morocco to participate in the CSAF Counterpart Visit program, as well as Morocco's decision to send an observer to AMC's Airlift Rodeo. These engagement activities add to a robust exercise program that includes AFRICAN LION, PHOENIX EXPRESS, SAHARAN WIND, AFRICAN PARTNERSHIP STATION, AFRICAN ENDEAVOR and FLINTLOCK, in addition to at least two annual JCETs. The Royal Moroccan Air Force has also requested the revival of MAJESTIC EAGLE, an annual air exercise that the U.S. suspended due to OIF and OEF commitments in 2003.

¶6. (SBU) The GOM has been formally invited to participate in the Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI) and extended USD 1 million to support a program in Morocco. Under the GPOI program, the U.S. intends to provide peace operations training and other support to the Moroccan military so that it can continue to develop and sustain peace operations capacity. Africa Command proposed Morocco as a potential GPOI partner for FY 2009 during the Fall 2008 and the GPOI Coordinating Committee agreed to that proposal in Spring ¶2009. The current plan for Morocco is to provide training and facilities refurbishment to a peace operations training center in Morocco. In order to ensure long-term sustainability, the GPOI program incorporates train-the-trainer elements into its training events. The Mission is working with the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, which will coordinate Morocco's GPOI request, to finalize the program.

¶7. (SBU) The Embassy is currently engaged in negotiations with the GOM on a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), and

Inspector General of the Armed Forces General (CHOD) Bennani has indicated interest in signing the Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA) with the USG in late December. However, the discussions over the SOFA have been ongoing for over a year. The Moroccans, who hosted U.S. bases throughout the Cold War, may not be convinced a full-fledged SOFA is needed. Unfounded rumors of prospective U.S. basing in connection with Africa Command have been publicly controversial here. Nonetheless, both the SOFA and ACSA would benefit the Moroccan armed forces, and your support for these two efforts would be appreciated.

External Issues

¶8. (SBU) Troubles with Algeria: The Moroccan relationship with Algeria is difficult, and the border between the two countries was closed by Algeria and remains closed. While the King and other GOM officials have publicly proposed opening the border and upgrading bilateral relations between the two countries, their entreaties have been repeatedly rebuffed. The Government of Algeria has linked progress on the border to all issues, particularly the Western Sahara.

¶9. (SBU) Western Sahara: Moroccan foreign policy is dominated by defending and seeking international recognition of its sovereignty claims over Western Sahara. The issue remains the most visible source of tension with Algeria, which has historically supported the POLISARIO's quest for independence by way of a UN-sponsored referendum. The issue led Morocco to leave the African Union and has been an obstacle to regional integration through the Arab Maghreb Union. In April 2007, Morocco proposed a new autonomy plan for Western Sahara, and a series of UN-sponsored negotiations with the POLISARIO began in Manhasset, New York. The Moroccan proposal, deemed "serious and credible" by the USG, would provide Sahrawis, the indigenous people of Western Sahara, autonomy in administering local affairs while respecting Moroccan sovereignty over the territory. There have been four rounds of formal talks and one informal round near Vienna, Austria, in August.

¶10. (SBU) Western Sahara Continued: Following the controversial lapsing of the contract of the former UN Secretary General's Personal Envoy, the UN selected retired U.S. Ambassador Christopher Ross to be the new Personal Envoy, and he made his first visit to the region in February and his second in July. While the informal talks produced no breakthroughs, the parties agreed to continue negotiations in an as-yet-to-be-determined format and location.

¶11. (SBU) Western Sahara Continued: Western Sahara experienced gross violations of human rights from 1975 until the end of King Hassan II's regime, and repression intensified after the short-lived Sahrawi uprising of 2005. Since late 2006, Morocco has slowly improved the human rights situation in the territory. Arbitrary arrests have sharply diminished and beatings and physical abuse by security forces have all but disappeared. Dissenters cannot publish or speak publicly in support of independence or a vote on self-determination. In 2008, known abusers were transferred, further easing the situation. However, we saw an uptick in alleged abuses in early 2009.

¶12. (SBU) Western Sahara Continued: In Fall 2009, tensions rose as the Government arrested seven pro-independence activists and then deported Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Prize recipient Aminatou Haidar. Upon arrival in Laayoune from Lanzarote (Spain) on November 13, she had asserted that her nationality was Sahrawi and began the process to renounce Moroccan nationality. Haidar has been on a hunger strike in the Canary Islands (Spain) since November 14. The Embassy maintains a Human Rights Dialogue with the Moroccan government in order to address these and other human rights issues.

Internal Issues

¶13. (SBU) Current Government: Prime Minister Abbas El Fassi's government, formed after the September 2007 legislative elections, is currently built on a fragile coalition. There has been periodic speculation that it might not last for the full five-year mandate. El Fassi's government filled with young technocrats from within and outside his Istiqlal (Independence) party, has performed better than many expected, however, and it now looks capable of a full term. El Fassi has participated extensively in international events and diplomacy. Internal democracy is growing within political parties. A political formation founded by Fouad Ali El Himma, an intimate of the King, has evolved into a new Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) by grouping several smaller parties. It now constitutes the largest political bloc in Parliament, and could lead should the current coalition falter. We currently see no prospect for a significant shift in Morocco's foreign and security policies. However, neither Parliament nor the Prime Minister has much say in these issues, which are managed by the Throne directly with concerned ministries.

¶14. (SBU) Parliamentary Reform: Morocco's political parties and the bicameral parliament are weak and structurally hamstrung from taking legislative initiatives or strongly articulating dissent. The Parliament provides no effective check on the monarchy or Government. Changing the Constitution would be necessary in order to change the power imbalance and institute formal democracy, but both Parliament and parties will have to improve their capacity and performance first. Nonetheless, both parties and Parliament have made some technical improvements, largely thanks to USG-funded programs from the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the State University of New York (SUNY), which have modestly improved the body's administrative capacity. These include establishment of a budget analysis office, a verbatim transcription service, and a consistent forum for training and debate among parliamentary members and staff.

¶15. (SBU) Parliamentary Reform Continued: Although the September 2007 parliamentary elections were the most transparent in the country's history, record low participation (37 percent of registered voters) reflected the lack of voter confidence in the institution. The State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) funded NDI to run the first ever international election observation in Morocco. MEPI also supported an ambitious training program for women running for municipal councils in June after a quota was established reserving 12 percent of the seats for women. Voter turnout in the June municipal elections was approximately 54 percent, and women captured nearly 13 percent of the seats, exceeding the number reserved for them.

¶16. (SBU) Human Rights and Reform: King Mohammed VI has embarked on a program of human rights reforms that include the Arab world's first truth commission and a revised Family Code. Although Morocco is a paragon of reform in the region, the reforms are still not deeply rooted in law, tradition or Constitution and could be rolled back. Continued support and encouragement from partners like the United States and Europe are essential.

¶17. (SBU) Religious Freedom: The Moroccan Constitution provides for the freedom to practice one's religion, although Islam is the official state religion. The GOM prohibits the distribution of non-Muslim religious materials and bans all proselytizing, but tolerates several small religious minorities. It also occasionally restricts Islamic organizations whose activities have exceeded the bounds of "acceptable religious practice" and become political in nature, lately targeting Shia. Morocco has become protective of and even positive toward the tiny remnant of its once substantial Jewish minority.

¶18. (SBU) Counterterrorism: The terrorist threat in Morocco emanates especially from small grassroots radical Islamic cells, which have shown some capacity to attack. In 2008, security forces disrupted six terrorist and foreign fighter cells, prosecuting 100 people. So far this year, five cells have been disrupted, including one group of 24 who were detained in September. The biggest threat is that attacks could deter tourism, an important component of the economy. The GOM's implementation of a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy emphasizing vigilant security measures, counter-radicalization policies, and robust international cooperation has been largely successful in containing the threat. Economic disruption, whether from attacks or the global economic crisis, remains the principal threat to stability here, but most observers believe Morocco will manage, unless there is catastrophic collapse.

¶19. (SBU) Counterterrorism Continued: In early-October, a multi-agency Embassy team participated in two days of wide-ranging, frank discussions with representatives of the Moroccan Ministry of the Interior. The discussions addressed issues including counterterrorism efforts, trafficking in persons, illegal migration, drug trafficking/counternarcotics, regional threats and stability, human rights, and assistance/development efforts. Designed as a strategy session to share information and lay the groundwork for future engagement, both sides agreed that the talks were useful and could lead to substantive programmatic and other collaboration.

¶20. (SBU) Counterterrorism Continued: Under the King who as "Commander of the Faithful" leads Moroccan Muslims and Jews, Morocco has standardized religious doctrine, consolidated control over religious schools, and sent specially trained imams to Europe to preach moderate messages to the Moroccan Diaspora. The vast majority of Morocco's population rejects Salafist and Wahhabist approaches to Islam and so does not support terrorist groups.

Economics, Trade, and Assistance

¶21. (SBU) The economy is relatively healthy, with growth expected to be above five percent this year, but marred by increasing disparities in wealth. Since implementation of our Free Trade Agreement (FTA) on January 1, 2006, bilateral commerce has more than doubled. A number of U.S. firms have increased their investment in Morocco, seeing new markets develop as a result of the FTA. The Department of Commerce's Commercial Law Development Program and the U.S. Trade and Development Agency conduct capacity building and technical assistance projects to assist Morocco to create an open and transparent trading environment and fully develop its trading potential. However, significant export growth to U.S. and other markets will also depend on Morocco's ability to capture a larger share of value added in its export products. Targeted assistance programs from USAID and MEPI aim at improving Morocco's ability to produce and market its exports in key sectors.

¶22. (SBU) U.S. assistance to Morocco is focused on four priorities: economic growth, counterterrorism, democracy and governance, and supporting quality education. In addition to a 2009 USAID budget of USD 18 million, it includes projects

through the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) and MEPI.

¶23. (U) The MCC signed a five-year, USD 697.5 million Millennium Challenge Account Compact with Morocco in 2007 to reduce poverty and increase economic growth. The five-year clock started ticking on September 15, 2008, with the compact's entry into force. The MCA supports five major projects selected for their potential to increase productivity and improve employment in high potential sectors of Morocco's economy: Fruit Tree Productivity, Small Scale Fisheries, Crafts, Financial Services, and Enterprise Support.

¶24. (U) Morocco benefits from several MEPI programs, including country-specific projects and inclusion in regional efforts. Some recent and ongoing programs include the program for women candidates, breast cancer awareness, support for civil society and youth organizations, developing freedom of expression via the Internet, supporting development of democratic leaders, technical assistance to meet environmental obligations under the FTA, political party training and capacity building, and the Financial Services Volunteer Corps. Other USG-funded projects support anti-corruption efforts (with the American Bar Association) and prison reform to undermine the foundations of extremism.

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